

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7 and Luke 2:1-20
12/24/2020 – Saginaw First UMC
“The Light Always Comes”
Rev. Amy Terhune

Nearly 200 years ago, Joseph Mohr and Franz Gruber put together a little hymn to sing with guitar for St Nicholas Parish Church in Oberndorf near Salzburg, Austria. Tradition has it that the organ wasn't working and that's why they wrote it, but that may just be legend. You know the words they penned—we'll sing them shortly. Silent Night, Holy Night, All is calm, All is bright... It is, perhaps, the quintessential Christmas Hymn, having been translated into 140 different languages and printed in nearly every Christian hymnal across the world. It has, at times, quieted gunfire from trenches and united opposing armies in song. Something about it strikes a chord deep within us, doesn't it? Triggers memories, perhaps. Draws out emotion.

But as I reflect on that favorite of hymns, I find myself wondering...was it? That night, that first Christmas—was it silent? I know it was holy, no question there—but was it calm? Was it bright? Somehow, frankly, I can't see it. The truth is that the Christmas story begins in chaos and in darkness. As I was thinking about how to possibly preach Christmas Eve in the middle of a pandemic, it suddenly struck me that much like the world today, the world of that time was also in uproar. It wasn't because of a pandemic, although they had plenty of those in ancient times. No, it was because of a census. The Roman Emperor wanted to count (and tax) his assets – his people. The Ancient Roman Empire at that time stretched from Spain up into England, across Europe to Turkey and southern Russia, down through the middle east all the way to the Persian Gulf, and all across northern Africa west to Morocco. It certainly was not the entire civilized world, as there were also great civilizations in China, and among the indigenous populations of Africa, Australia, and North and South America at the same time – but it was the entire known world for those who wrote our scriptures and birthed the church. Millions of people are being sent back to their ancestral home to be counted. Not just Mary and Joseph or a few Israelites. Merchants, soldiers, tradesmen – they all have to go back to wherever it is they came from. Imagine the logistics of trying to get from Rome to Madrid or Basra or Tangier or London. Imagine the business put on hold while you endure months of travel and expense to go back to your ancestral home. Mary and Joseph had it relatively easy – they only had to go 80 miles, albeit on foot.

It fascinates me that the two major Christian holy days – Christmas and Easter – both begin in chaos and darkness, with crowds of people who've traveled from other places, and shepherds abiding in the fields in the dark or women bringing spices before dawn has broken. What that says to me is that God is doing incredible things when most of the world is still asleep, both literally and figuratively.

But I'll also make a confession to you. At Easter, each gospel includes a resurrection account. I've got four different scriptures that I can preach on at Easter, which allows for variety. But when it comes to Christmas, my choices are Luke 2, Luke 2 or Luke 2. And while congregations love to sing the classic old Christmas hymns year after year, one cannot simply get up and preach the same sermon year after year, leaving the preacher to ask: what else can I say? What insight can I offer that hasn't been offered before? How can I make this new and fresh? This year, I so desperately need new and fresh! I'm so wearied by the isolation and the separation. Here I am at another major holiday preaching to a big, dark, empty sanctuary. And I know that God can do awesome feats with empty things. Empty voids suddenly have light and life at creation. So do empty tombs and barren landscapes, and starless skies.

I've since come to the conclusion that I can't make this new. No matter how hard I try or how much I'd like to make it so, I can't hear it again for the first time. But then, maybe it isn't my job to make it new. It's *not* new! Maybe my job is show how it's timeless, why it matters. Maybe my job is to let the ancient truth recorded here make *me* new. And I'm so ready for new.

And so an infant arrives. A new baby. Vulnerable. Helpless. Utterly dependent on others. Not even yet able to hold up his own head. And yet, this infant brings light into the world and hope into the emptiness. He brings the newness of promise and life and dawn. He is God coming to us, before we even recognized the emptiness of our world and the need we had for God's presence to fill it.

A few years back, I received one of those compilation CDs full of Christmas Songs. I'd always wanted one—it takes me back to my childhood and my mom's old Christmas Records. And it's great. It's got Elvis singing "I'll be home for Christmas" and it's got Buddy Holly, Burl Ives, and Julie Andrews. It's got everything from the great old hymns to the Waltz of the Sugar Plumb Fairy to Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer to that Christmas Song that those dumb little Chipmunks sing in falsetto voices. It runs the gamut from the beautifully holy to the nauseatingly sentimental, but it's festive and I like it. Until this appointment, I've always been in places where I have to do quite a bit of driving in order to get to stores and meetings and so forth, so after I got it, I put it on in the car as I was heading from one place to another. And along about a third of the way into one of the CDs, a song came on that was quite obviously from the 70s, and I thought to myself: this is going to be interesting, because I can't think of any popular Christmas songs from the 70s.

*They said there'll be snow at Christmas.
They said there'll be peace on earth;
But instead, it just kept on raining pale tears for a virgin birth.*

Not particularly extraordinary, but its okay, so far, so good. It goes on:

They sold me a dream of Christmas; they sold me a silent night;

My spirit rose up within me: Yeah! Sing it, buddy! Give unbridled commercialism a kick in the gut!

They told me a fairy story, till I believed in the Israelite.

And I remember in that moment that my jaw hit the steering wheel. The Israelite had to be Jesus. But a fairy story? I was indignant. I was offended. I mean, I'm prepared to accept the secular stuff that goes with Christmas—frosty the snowman and Rudolph and Santa and all that jazz—but to include a song on a Christmas CD that actually attempts to debunk the true meaning of Christmas—that made me mad. So I made up my mind that hated this song, but just for spite, I kept listening because I wanted to see how bad it got.

*I wish you a hopeful Christmas; I wish you a brave new year;
All anguish, pain, and sorrow leave your heart
and let your road be clear.*

Nice sentiments, but how can Christmas be hopeful if the Israelite is a fairy tale?

*They said there'd be snow at Christmas.
They said there'd be peace on earth.
Hallelujah! Noel! Be it heaven or hell,
the Christmas we get, we deserve.*

And then a full orchestra big band sound blazes forth and that's how the song ends, and then I was really annoyed, because I soooo wanted to hate the song, and he just had to end with a little piece of profound truth. I mean, I've had Christmases where I run up debt and get over-programmed, and it is sort of a hell of my own making. So I googled it. The song is called "I believe in Father Christmas" by Emerson, Lake, and Palmer. It turns out they actually do believe in Jesus. In fact, the video, which you can watch on youtube, is filmed in in Israel, of all places. He's singing about snow and Christmas trees while sitting in a desert surrounded by Bedouin people, palm trees, and some camels. There's a shot of him strumming his guitar way up on a cliff by the caves of Qumran where they found the Dead Sea Scrolls. The video ends with that cheery big band sound accompanying distressing video footage of the Vietnam War, which is what finally gave me some insight. This was a young man ensnared in the disillusionment of coming of age in a world gone mad. I still don't know whether I like it or not, but I get it.

And I think it is to just such a world and to just such people that God comes. He comes to people and places where all is not calm and all is not bright—the broken, the suffering, the despised, the jaded, the war-weary. This night proves unequivocally that God loves us. Don't look for that to make sense, because sometimes it doesn't. We feel utterly unlovable. But we aren't. And while this is comforting, don't look for it to be comfortable, because sometimes it isn't. Following a God who loves the broken, the suffering, the despised, the jaded puts a demand on us, on our values and priorities. Yet God is not content to leave us in darkness. The message of this night is that sooner or later, the light always comes.

Shattering the darkness with news of a messiah, angels from the highest places in the universe came in a blaze of light to announce peace—but not merely peace as in the absence of conflict. Not merely peace as in the quieting of fear and cynicism. They came to announce a deeper kind of peace—the kind out of which stems all the varieties of peace for which we pray. They came breaking the silence of God. They came with the peace, love, and light of a relational God. Because sooner or later, the new day dawns, the new arrives, the light always comes. These angels come with good news, profound news: ready or not, God has come. [ideas in this ¶ extracted from "All Is Calm, All Is Bright" by William G. Carter, www.Sermons.com.] Amen.